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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TUNIS 000014

SIPDIS

FOR NEA/FO, NEA/IPA AND NEA/MAG

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAL](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: TUNISIAN "STREET" VENTS ANGER OVER GAZA

REF: A. TUNIS 10  
[1](#)B. 08 TUNIS 1238

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (C) Anger in the Tunisian "street" continues to increase over civilian casualties in Gaza, and the GOT is taking measures to show that it is not out of step. President Ben Ali again expressed solidarity with the people of Gaza, and was credited with identifying with their plight in a key Friday sermon. There has been an uptick in the number of demonstrations, especially by students, with some high schools closing as a result. Police have allowed some peaceful demonstrations to take place. Some activists have used the Gaza demonstrations to protest GOT policies; if this trend continues, a GOT crackdown is likely. More demonstrations are predicted for next week, when university students wrap up their exams. The labor federation leader welcomed the US abstention on UNSCR 1860, and acknowledged that Israeli civilians need to be protected. But he said that US support for Israel had weakened the position of Arab moderates throughout the region. End Summary.

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Government Efforts to Show Solidarity  
With Palestinians (Not Hamas)  
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[1](#)2. (C) President Ben Ali opened the January 7 cabinet meeting by expressing his preoccupation with the incapacity of the UN Security Council to bring about an immediate stop to the "aggression" against Gaza. He also expressed appreciation to the Tunisian people for their solidarity with their Palestinian brothers. Meanwhile, the GOT-approved Friday sermon as delivered at the Abidine Mosque underlined that President Ben Ali has taken on the Palestinian cause as a personal one. (Note: The Abidine Mosque is associated with President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, who usually attends prayers there on Islamic holy days.) The sermon reminded the assembled that peace is the core of Islam and that one must not be tempted by violence. In addition, the GOT has been allowing some demonstrations to go forward, including a brief one outside the Abidine Mosque, just after Friday prayers. Among the chants heard at this demonstration was "Ben Ali! Palestine!"

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A Strongly Worded Protest Letter  
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[1](#)3. (SBU) The Tunisian American Friendship Association on January 8 sent the Ambassador a letter of protest and requested a meeting. The letter described the events as a stark reminder of how the Palestinian Israeli conflict determines the nature of the US relationship with the Arab

and Muslim world. "We have been watching the atrocities perpetrated by an American-trained, -equipped and -financed army," the letter said. It continued: "We do not believe these bloodbaths will bring peace and security to our region. Not since 1948 have air raids protected Israel." The Ambassador will offer to receive the group next week.

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More, and Bigger, Demonstrations  
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¶4. (C) In addition to the authorized demonstration outside the Abidine Mosque, an Amcit resident in Sousse reported to DATT that demonstrations have been going on in Sousse since January 8 and are growing larger. She said that the main street in Sousse was completely full of demonstrators at midday, with adults having joined the youth. She described high school and college-aged students as becoming more aggressive -- climbing on top of cars and shouting slogans against the United States and Israel. She said the police were on hand but were only blocking side streets and keeping demonstrators moving and preventing them from intimidating tourists.

¶5. (SBU) In addition, al-Jazeera reported on January 7 and 8 on a demonstration of some 20,000 students in Sfax. Meanwhile, many other student demonstrations have been reported in the last two days in the Governorates of Ben Arous, Rades, Ariana, Bizerte, Jendouba, Monastir and Kairouan. The Tunisian Journalists' Syndicate announced a solidarity day with Gaza on January 13.

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How the Students Do It  
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¶6. (SBU) At least some high school students are on "strike" today, according to a local teacher, who told the Ambassador that her and other high schools are closed -- the students refused to go to class. Moreover, Embassy has learned more in recent days about the dynamics of recent high school demonstrations (Ref A). Apparently, some schools have been "going on strike" at an announced hour, at which point students exit their school go out into the streets. While police have broken up most of these spontaneous demonstrations, they have allowed some to go forward. One Embassy FSN reported that police in El Menzah on January 9 allowed high school students to take to the streets, on condition that they remain non-violent. Another FSN told us that at his daughter's high school in Ariana, the school has permitted students to wear black armbands as a form of protest over the Gaza situation. Meanwhile, according to bloggers, students at Ben Arous high school wrote the word "Gaza" using their backpacks (about 100) in the school yard.

¶7. (SBU) While Tunisia's university students have been preoccupied with exams this week, there have continued to be some university protests. For example, on January 8, students from the University of Manouba's School of Journalism and Information Sciences tried to march into the city of Manouba, 1.5 kilometers away from the campus. Police prevented them from doing so. In addition, the University of Tunis' Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences held its second demonstration of the week -- this time attracting a reported crowd of 1000. According to the relative of an FSN, professors at the University of Monastir encouraged students to demonstrate, but police stopped them from going into the streets.

¶8. (C) Secretary General of the General Union for Tunisian Students (UGET) Ezzeddine Zaatour told PolOff on January 9 that he expected campus demonstrations to get bigger next week after students have finished their exams. He said the Union has organized many, if not all, of the campus

demonstrations and had collected students' donations of medical and other supplies for the people of Gaza. He said the UGET condemns the Israeli attacks but does not support Hamas' use of violence either. The UGET supports the Gaza people and urges peace and an end to the violence.

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Other Forms of Protest  
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¶9. (SBU) Because of strict government controls on demonstrations, Tunisian activists have become increasingly creative in expressing solidarity with the population of Gaza in recent days. For example, student groups have launched clothing and medicine drives intended to benefit the people of Gaza. In the artistic community, the playwright and film producer Moncef Dhouib announced that he had donated the revenues from his play last weekend to the people of Gaza; popular Tunisian singer Saber Rebai announced that he would not sing as long as the fighting in Gaza continues. In addition, the NGO Freedom and Equity reported that prisoners serving terrorism-related sentences at Borj al-Roumi prison in Bizerte went on a one-day hunger strike on January 8 in solidarity with the people of Gaza.

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The View from the Labor Federation  
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¶10. (C) The General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) has been one of the key institutions organizing demonstrations and other activities in support of Gaza, especially outside of the capital. Adbessalem Jerad, Secretary General of the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) and the Arab Maghreb Workers Union told PolOff January 9 that the UGTT's actions are consistent with its history of taking positions on both domestic and international issues. He said the UGTT condemns the Israeli attacks but also acknowledges that Israeli civilians need to be protected. He made clear that the UGTT does not support Hamas, use of violence. He opined, however, that Hamas was reacting to the situation imposed by Israel. He said there will be real peace only when there is an independent Palestinian state; otherwise, violence will continue on both sides.

¶11. (C) Jerad was happy to hear that the United States had abstained on UNSCR 1860. He said the UGTT will always respect the United States for its support for self-determination and against colonialism but that the USG

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has recently been distancing itself from these principles. Jerad had just returned from the extraordinary meeting of the Central Council of the International Union of Arab Workers in support of the Palestinian people in Damascus January 5-6, where he talked with Palestinian union activists. He indicated that he had asked them why the Palestinians insist on sending rockets into Israel, to which they replied that "the calm" had not lead to diplomatic progress as promised, but was "simply a pretext to continue the occupation with the embargo, the barrier wall and expansion of the settlements." Jerad complained that "The Bush Administration promised peace by the end of 2008 with the Annapolis Process and instead we have war." He continued that the United States and the EU bear a heavy responsibility for their "silence" in response to the Israeli attacks and noted that their support for Israel had weakened the position of Arab moderates throughout the region and had reinforced the radicals.

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Some Protests Target Domestic Situation, GOT  
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¶12. (C) According to bloggers and one eyewitness, some labor union demonstrations have featured slogans directed against the GOT, such as: "From Redeyef to Gaza, the claims are the

same." Thus, at least some protesters are prepared to use the Gaza demonstrations to also protest the GOT's handling of recent unrest in Tunisia's southern mining region (Ref B). In Gafsa and Redeyef, anti-government feelings are still running high over the conviction of 38 people last month for engaging in illegal protests against the government. Labor federation members been particularly vocal in their support for the people of Gafsa and have been more so since many of those convicted last month were labor union activists.

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Comment  
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¶13. (C) The GOT has taken deliberate steps in the past couple of days to show that it is in sync with its population, which is increasingly angry at the civilian casualties in Gaza. At the same time, it is continuing to be careful to ensure that popular reaction does not get out of hand. It is a delicate balancing act that will only become more difficult if university students become more active next week. Thus far, none of the people caught participating in illegal demonstrations has been detained for more than a few hours. But, if activists continue to push the envelope by using Gaza protests to voice grievances against the GOT, a harsher GOT crackdown is likely. Embassy will continue to monitor this aspect of the demonstrations, and report accordingly.

¶14. (C) Local media coverage reflects this GOT strategy. The only protests that have been reported locally are GOT-authorized protests. Likewise, local newspapers for the past two days have carried stories suggesting that local civil society organizations that are loyal to the GOT are planning to deliver petitions about the situation in Gaza to the US Ambassador. In all likelihood, these organizations were instructed to do so; the GOT would much rather that the population's anger be directed toward the United States, rather than toward moderate Arab States, let alone Carthage.

¶15. (C) The fact that the Abidine Mosque's Friday sermon mentioned the situation in Gaza also represents a concession that is consistent with the GOT strategy. (Note: On Friday, January 2, no Tunisian sermons, which are drafted by the GOT, mentioned Gaza.) After Imam al-Qaradhawi's call on al-Jazeera for all Imams to devote Friday prayers today to the situation in Gaza, the GOT faced raised expectations. Its apparent compromise was artful: The matter was addressed rather innocuously, in some, not all, mosques, and not by the Grand Mufti. Some imams reportedly followed the advice in January 8's populist Arabic daily ash-Shourouq and only prayed for the people of Gaza during the intercessory prayers after the sermon. End Comment.

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